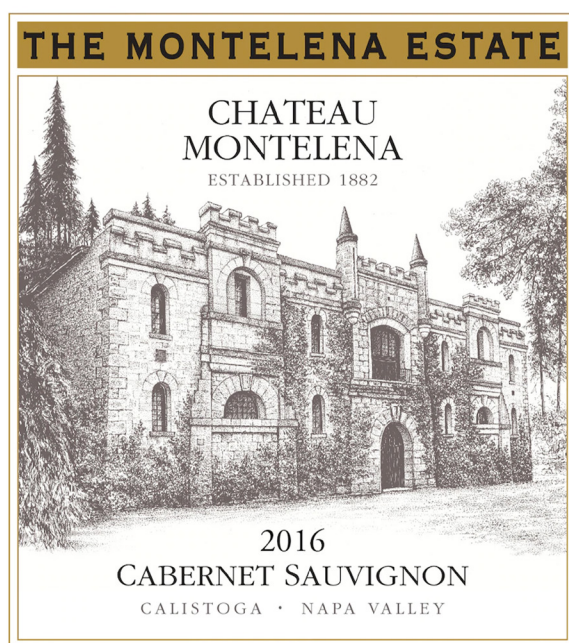


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Wine 101: Here's How to Decode Those Confusing Labels

BY DAVE MCINTYRE



These are the elements of wine snobbery, if you have the wrong attitude: The glass raised to the light, the ostentatious sniff and swirl, and the post-swallow discourse about the wine's merits or faults. But they are also key to enjoying wine as something more than alcohol. And these steps can help you discover the types of wine you like and inform your purchasing choices.

So while we're self-isolating, sheltering in place, staying at home or even venturing timidly out to test the boundaries of the new normal, let's step back and review the basics of wine appreciation. It will be something to do between sourdough feedings.

For the next several weeks, we'll review the basic fundamentals of wine, from before we open the bottle through tasting it. Along the way, I will quote from and highlight some helpful online resources and books that offer opportunities for further exploration.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Pick up the nearest wine bottle and try to see what it's telling you about the wine that is—or was—inside. Look for the name of the producer or winery, the country, region and area the wine came from, the vintage and the grape variety. Some wines, especially on the value end of the price scale, will only have a brand name, rather than a producer's. That's a common practice for larger U.S. companies and for importers creating exclusive labels by working with cooperative wineries.

The region denotes where the wine comes from. Look for specificity. A wine labeled "California" is probably made from grapes sourced from two or more disparate vineyard areas in the Golden State. A smaller region suggests higher quality, right down to a single-vineyard wine, which is often denoted on the label. These generally mean higher quality, and higher price.

In the label shown here, Chateau Montelena is the winery name. Napa Valley is the region, and Calistoga, in the northern part of the valley, is the subregion. (The traditional term for a wine region is "appellation." In the United States, they are American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs.) "The Montelena Estate" tells us the wine comes from Montelena's own vineyard. The word "estate" usually tells us the winery grew the grapes in the wine. Since it's labeled cabernet sauvignon, we know that under U.S. law it is at least 75 percent that grape. (Montelena sometimes adds a splash of cabernet franc.)

This is a historic winery, established in 1882. This label doesn't tell us that Montelena helped put California on the world wine map by winning the famous Judgment of Paris tasting in 1976 with its chardonnay (still one of California's best), later immortalized in the movie "Bottle Shock." That fame adds to the price. This is a top wine from a storied winery in the U.S. region most famous for cabernet sauvignon. We can expect it to be delicious. It's also expensive, at about \$150 or more.

Now look for the alcohol level. On a U.S. wine, this is usually in excruciatingly tiny print on the front label; imported wines typically include this on the back. The alcohol listed on a wine label is imprecise for regulatory reasons, but it does give an indication of style, though not quality. A higher-alcohol wine—14 percent or more—will be more powerful and richer in body and might taste sweeter. A wine at about 12 to 13 percent may be more refreshing, and lighter. If a white wine is 10 percent or less, that's probably because of residual or unfermented sugar. Some German rieslings are made this way. Don't let that deter you from trying them, just don't be surprised.

One of the more important pieces of information on the label of a foreign wine is the name of the importer. If you like a wine, note the importer's name, and look for other wines from that portfolio. Some of the more singular wines carry the name of an individual rather than a company. Find one whose palate you like, and you will drink well for years.

These are some of the clues the label gives us before we pull the cork and pour the wine. They set our expectations for the first sniff and sip.

For more exploration: My favorite website for basic wine education is winefolly.com. The main author, Madeline Puckette, is a graphic designer and certified sommelier gifted in presenting information concisely through infographics as much as words. Each page of her website and her award-winning "Wine Folly" book is like an index-card crib sheet with just the right information to get you through the next fraught dinner party conversation, and to stimulate your appetite for more wine knowledge.